

THE U.A.W. FIGHTS RACE PREJUDICE

Case History on the Industrial Front

IRVING HOWE AND B. J. WIDICK

IN THE 1920's Detroit became the unchallenged motor capital and thereby one of the great industrial centers of the world. In the 1930's it was the scene of a vast labor upsurge, the result of which was a minor revolution in American life. In the 1940's it was wracked by race riots more bloody and prolonged than any that had recently occurred in the South.

Detroit is a city where the robotization of labor and the mechanization of life reach their height, where the strains of American society are ugliest and sharpest. Here Northern and Southern culture patterns meet most intimately and violently. Hundreds of thousands of its auto workers are Southerners from Alabama farms and Kentucky towns. Physically cramped and psychologically tense, the city has acquired a raw, brutal quality that can be found nowhere else—a quality that is partly the result of a clash between Southern folkways, uprooted from their natural context, and a mechanical, depersonalized urbanism.

TO THOSE who have followed the history of any one of the various state FEPC laws, it may have been something of a surprise to see the number of complaints lodged against trade unions for discriminatory practices. Here, IRVING HOWE and B. J. WIDICK analyze the attempt of one trade union—the United Automobile Workers (CIO)—not only to wipe out discrimination in its own ranks, but to give its members some sense of the injustice and wastefulness of discrimination in general. Mr. Howe, who has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY and other periodicals, was born in New York City in 1920, and studied at City College and Brooklyn College. Mr. Widick has long been active in the trade union movement, and has himself been a member of the UAW, as well as other unions. Much of the material in this article is drawn from their book, *The UAW and Walter Reuther*, which is to be published this month by Random House.

Detroit is lacerated by complex racial and religious conflicts. The Southern whites cling to anti-Negro prejudice; between them and the large Polish minority there is constant, though seldom reported, friction. Before the large-scale influx of Southerners, the Poles showed little anti-Negro feeling, but in recent years they have "learned" from the Southerners. And naturally—for the Negroes are probably the only group below the Poles in Detroit's scale of social status.

Almost everything about Detroit has made life difficult for its 350,000 Negroes. Though living in a Northern city, they have suffered from blatant forms of discrimination usually associated with the South. They have been packed into "Paradise Valley," a slum nearly as dreadful as the one that lies on the flank of the nation's capital; they have been confined to the worst jobs, and have been the last hired and the first fired; and they have been subjected to intermittent orgies of violence.

The United Automobile Workers (CIO) has had to face the "Negro problem" from the day of its formation. No union in the United States has experienced greater difficulties with regard to race relations; no organization of comparable size provides so crucial a setting for the study of the tangled relationships and periodic crises that arise when a serious attempt is made to combat race prejudice in daily life.

THE auto industry was one of the last major industries in the United States to hire large numbers of Negro workers. Behind this fact is a depressing bit of historical irony: the white auto workers, before the rise of the CIO, had been too weak to call sustained strikes, and hence the companies had little need for Negro strikebreakers.

Negroes were excluded from regular jobs in most auto plants as a matter of course. Until 1935 only the Ford River Rouge plant hired Negroes in large numbers.

Those Negroes who did work in the auto plants were confined either to janitorial chores or to the unpleasant, back-breaking foundry jobs that white men did not want. Except in the Rouge plant, they were barred from skilled work. Even after the industry's unionization, this policy prevailed; it has by no means been stamped out yet.

For the companies, racial discrimination proved advantageous in several ways. It assured them of a large pool of cheap docile labor that might be used as a threat to beat down demands made by white workers; it meant, too, that the sharp color line drawn in the plants would hinder the organization of workers into one united group. The employers' defense—or rationalization—of discriminatory hiring policies was either that Negro workers were unable to perform skilled work or that white men refused to work beside them. In the latter claim there was, of course, considerable truth, for racial prejudice cuts deep into all classes in American society. But the essential point is that the companies, while they had not themselves originated racial prejudice, were often ready to take advantage of it.

When the big sitdown strikes broke out in 1936 and 1937, few Negroes participated. During the Studebaker sitdown at South Bend in November 1936, the Oldsmobile sitdown at Lansing in January 1937, and the one at Flint General Motors in February 1937, most Negro workers simply stayed at home. They neither cooperated with the strikers nor showed any willingness to serve as scabs; they merely watched, warily.

It is not hard to understand why they took this attitude. Past relations with white workers in the plants had usually been bad; at Flint Chevrolet, for example, there had been bitter clashes between white and colored workers for some months before the sitdown. The AFL, then still the dominant labor group, had often been viciously discriminatory, and Negro workers saw little

reason to suppose the UAW would be better. But perhaps the strongest reason for the Negro workers' scepticism about the sit-downs was that they had become habituated to following the timid leadership of the Negro middle class, a precarious group that depended on the patronage and blessing of Michigan's white industrialists.

Of course, both the UAW and the CIO as a whole, fearing that Negroes might be used as strikebreakers, formally pledged themselves to non-discriminatory policies. And the very nature of industrial unionism made impractical the racial divisions common in the AFL. Craft unions could appeal to limited sections of a labor force, pitting skilled against unskilled, white against black, and thereby aggravating racial tensions. But the new industrial unions, simply in order to survive, had to win the support of at least a minority of the Negro workers. For some labor leaders in the auto industry racial equality was a matter of dedicated conviction, for others a mere necessity. In any case, the CIO unions had no choice; without racial equality, the mass industrial unions could not have been built.

DURING the period of its early organization, the UAW took special pains to win Negro workers. Its press and publicity emphasized the theme of racial equality; if a stray organizer showed prejudice, he was quickly dismissed; and white workers were slowly and painfully taught that if they failed to cooperate with Negroes they would never win their demands. When a Negro worker showed qualities of leadership he was quickly encouraged; in the Chrysler sitdown of March 1937, a Negro, Sam Fanroy, was elected to the strike committee. As a rule, wherever the Negroes were a substantial fraction of a plant's labor force they cooperated much more readily than where they were a small group, for in the former instance they felt strong enough not merely to fight with white workers against management but also, if necessary, by themselves against white workers. In the Detroit Midland Steel plant, where about half

the workers were Negroes, relations were excellent; at the Dodge plant, where fewer Negroes worked, clashes broke out.

In the Southern auto plants the problem was far more difficult, for the union clashed with a fervently defended pattern of prejudice. At the General Motors plant in Atlanta, union organizers could not persuade white workers to admit Negroes into the local, and it was only with some difficulty that the whites were dissuaded from pressing for the Negroes' discharge. As late as 1941 Negro workers were still kept out of the Atlanta GM local, and only afterwards were they reluctantly admitted.

In order to gain recognition, the UAW was sometimes forced to accept contracts that perpetuated some old plant conditions. That meant that Negroes remained frozen in low-status jobs, and consequently that their original doubts about the union were reinforced. In other situations the UAW risked stirring dormant prejudices by demanding the improvement of Negro workers' conditions. When the UAW forced companies to upgrade Negroes, some white workers felt that their ethnic "superiority" and economic status were being endangered. No quick solution to such problems was possible, if only because the antagonism between skilled white and unskilled Negro criss-crossed the general skilled-unskilled antagonism. But the mere fact that industrial unions like the UAW tend to lessen competition between craft groups within an industry helped smooth race relations. After some experience, white workers could be made to see that improvement of Negro conditions also helped improve their own conditions.

Gradually, at least a minority of Negro workers became convinced that the UAW could be trusted to defend them. Big rhetoric meant little, but little actions could mean much. When Negro delegates to the 1940 UAW convention at St. Louis suffered from discrimination, the union voted to hold future gatherings only where Negroes would receive equal treatment. A small enough matter—but precisely such concrete little steps make the deepest impression.

OF ALL the auto companies, Ford had worked out by far the most astute policy on Negro employment. By hiring ten per cent of his workers from among Negroes, Henry Ford gained the clinging loyalty of the entire colored community. White workers would remain at their jobs at the Rouge because they had no alternative; Negro workers, because they considered the jobs lucky breaks made possible by Mr. Ford's friendliness to their people.

By sprinkling donations among Negro organizations and hiring thousands of Negro workers, Ford became a power in the Detroit Negro world. He donated the parish house of the St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and befriended its Father Langton Daniels; his Negro agent, Donald Marshall, taught Sunday School classes at St. Matthew's; and once a year Henry Ford himself honored the church with a visit. He also gave substantial aid to the Second Baptist Church, whose minister, Reverend Robert Bradby, was one of his personal favorites. When either Reverend Bradby or Father Daniels recommended a Negro for a job, he was as good as hired. Negro politicians also, though less successfully, served as labor agents for Ford.

Ford also helped to finance the all-Negro village of Inkster and provided relief jobs at one dollar a day when its residents were unemployed. The Fords entertained committees from Negro women's clubs, invited George Washington Carver to their home, and paid Marian Anderson and Dorothy Maynor to sing over the radio on the Ford Sunday Hour. These things made a deep impression on Detroit's Negro world—and the Ford Company made the most of it.

When A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was invited in 1938 to speak at a Negro church, those of its members who were employed at Ford were threatened with firing. After Randolph spoke, some were actually dismissed and frankly told that Randolph's speech was the reason. When Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, made a pro-union speech at a Negro church, a second appearance was denied him three

months later—for in the meantime, the minister of the church admitted, “Don Marshall heard about the speech and was very angry. . . . He said he would never hire another member of the Bethel Church if the church allowed any more speakers to come here and criticize the company.” And when the Negro community voted Democratic in the 1932 elections, Don Marshall did not hesitate to say, “My employer, he was disappointed when he saw the returns from the Negro districts. . . .”

Ford's policy almost paid off. In April 1941, when Ford was negotiating with a puny AFL local in an attempt to edge out the UAW, a group of Negro clergymen urged the Negro workers to support the AFL against the UAW. Pressure had been applied by the Ford company for public support of the AFL, and though the ministers privately expressed their distaste for the AFL's record on race relations, they endorsed it as “a truly American organization . . . [which] has acted in the best interests of the Negro. . . .”

For the Negro middle class, the situation was admittedly difficult. Negro storekeepers and professionals, ministers and politicians, depended on Ford patronage in the direct form of subsidies and the indirect form of jobs. In an excellent study of Negro auto labor, Lloyd Bailer writes: “As long as the church membership is employed, the minister is able to keep his head above water. His ability to place job applicants swells church-attendance and enables him to keep his flock.” Little wonder that the UAW found it so hard to organize Negro workers!

A minority of Negro leaders—including Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Reverend Horace White of Detroit—was bold enough to risk helping the union. When the crucial 1941 Ford strike broke out, several hundred Negro workers remained in the plant, under the supervision of the Ford Service Department, after white workers walked out. But the Negroes could no longer be used as a solid strikebreaking bloc, and a large section of them was neutral

enough to insure the success of the strike. Later they would be convinced that their place was in the union.

WITH the outbreak of the war in 1941, a new crisis in race relations began in the auto plants. Among the causes were:

(1) The influx of new Southern white workers brought into the UAW thousands of men who knew nothing of the union's slowly nurtured tradition of tolerance;

(2) The virtual exclusion of Negroes from skilled jobs in auto plants at a time when the government was bemoaning a manpower shortage aroused immense resentment among Negroes;

(3) The Detroit housing crisis aggravated already severe tensions between Negro and white;

(4) President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 prohibiting discrimination in war industries had aroused great hopes among Negroes; when it was largely ignored by industry and loosely enforced by the government, their resentment was increased.

When conversion to war production in the auto plants resulted in the upgrading of some Negro workers, many whites rebelled. A series of stoppages broke out against such upgrading or even against assignments to working with Negroes—and the union was usually helpless to prevent them. Two stoppages took place at Packard, one in November 1941 and the other in June 1943; four at Chrysler in February and June 1942; two at Timken Detroit Axle in July 1942; and one at Hudson Naval Ordnance in June 1942.

The stoppages at Packard were typical. In November 1941, white workers sat down on the job after two Negro metal polishers had been transferred to war work. The company readily withdrew the Negroes, and the officials of the Packard UAW local did little to defend them. In UAW circles there was talk that the Ku Klux Klan was influential in the local and had threatened to oppose its officials if they defended the Negroes. One white Packard worker told an interviewer: “About forty per cent of the

workers here are Polish. There are also a lot of Southern whites. Both of them are very prejudiced. The rumor got out not long ago that Negroes were going to start working in the trim department—where I work. Most of them there are Southern whites. They said 'I'll be goddamned if I'm going to work with a goddam black nigger.'"

In 1943 another stoppage took place in Packard. When Negroes in the foundry briefly protested because they were not being upgraded according to seniority provisions, twenty-five thousand white workers walked out for four days. Walter White, NAACP leader, wrote that "subsequent investigation indicated that only a relatively small percentage of Packard workers actually wanted to go on strike," but the sad truth seems to be that he was wrong. Actually, thousands of Packard workers milled around the plant, listening to anti-Negro harangues. When R. J. Thomas, then UAW president, urged the men to return to work, he was booed.

But if the situation at Packard was appalling, Negroes were being upgraded in such plants as Kelsey Hayes, Consolidated Brass, and Briggs without any serious trouble. It is significant that in those plants, such as Briggs, where the UAW had its best locals, there was the least trouble. From the picture of the war years the terrible anti-Negro riots and walkouts jut out sharply, but it must be remembered that all the while the union leadership was trying desperately to educate new members, and to remind old members of its tradition of racial equality. During the bloody riot of 1943 not a single incident occurred in the plants—a remarkable fact.

UAW leaders and responsible militants had been taught by their wartime experience that the problem of prejudice would remain with the union for a long time to come. The friendliness that might develop during a strike would soon evaporate and in its place there would again arise the fears and hatred that are part of the heritage of so many white Americans. The momentary enthusiasm of Negro workers for the union could quickly give way to their more basic suspicion that all "white organizations" were

their enemies. In the war years, the union had learned that once a riot started little could be done to prevent it from spreading over an entire city; the patient work of education carried on over the years could be destroyed in an hour.

WHILE the union was being shaken by outbursts of anti-Negro feeling, a significant debate was taking place at its conventions. Since 1940 demands had been raised in the UAW for the creation of a special post for a Negro on its executive board. Negro members seemed largely to favor this proposal, perhaps seeing in it a way to protect their status in the union. Here was a situation made to order for a group ready to engage in demagogic exploitation of Negro grievances—and the Communist party eager for the job.

At the 1943 UAW convention in Buffalo, one hundred and fifty out of two thousand delegates were Negroes. A caucus of Negro delegates was held to which all UAW leaders were invited to explain their views. In a principled and courageous speech, Walter Reuther told the Negroes that he considered any special position designated for a minority group an inverse form of Jim Crow which he could not support. But with the demagoguery of the Communist leaders and the political inexperience of most of the Negro delegates, ninety per cent of the latter voted to support the caucus headed by George Addes and staffed by Stalinists, because it favored a special Negro post. Though the proposal was defeated on the convention floor, most of the Negro delegates were led into a temporary alliance with the Stalinists because the latter seemed to them their special champions.

The issue itself is of great interest. There is a special Negro problem and it needs special attention. Consequently, why not elect a special member of the executive board to handle the problem? And who could do that so well as a Negro—perhaps a "special kind" of Negro? But as the more alert Negro workers were soon to realize, this proposal meant that a Negro was to be "up-

graded" in the union not because of his talents but because of the color of his skin—and was this not merely a special inversion of the practice to which they so bitterly and rightly objected in the shops? Suppose, further, that the proposal were extended just a bit: since Negro workers had special problems, why not help them by putting them in special . . . separate . . . locals?

How dubious were the motives of the Stalinists in supporting this proposal was later shown at the 1947 Michigan CIO convention. There William Humphries, a Negro delegate and already a member of the Michigan CIO board, denounced the proposal for a special post for a Negro by insisting that any self-respecting Negro would want to be elected to office not because he was a Negro but because he was a good leader. When Humphries ran for office, the Addes-Stalinist bloc did not vote for him—the Stalinists would support a Negro only if he were in their tow and had been properly stamped: "Negro." By then, their motives were understood and the majority of delegates, white and Negro, repudiated them. True, the Reuther group's opposition to the special board post had been politically disadvantageous in 1943, but by 1948 it had resulted in healthier relations between white and colored unionists.

WITH the end of the war, the old discriminatory patterns in hiring reappeared. Thousands of Negro men and women lost their jobs and, even if sometimes mistakenly, could not help feeling that this was because of Jim Crow practices. "The Negro," said Walter Reuther, "has experienced the quick erosion of his wartime gains. . . ."

The crucial test for the UAW with regard to race relations will come if unemployment in Michigan, now on the increase, reaches large proportions. There is as yet no serious unemployment among Detroit auto workers, but in Muskegon and Grand Rapids many auto workers are being laid off. Since, as a rule, Negro auto workers have less seniority than whites, the Negroes will suffer

first and most heavily from unemployment. And once the auto workers begin to fear for their jobs, some whites will probably feel that they would be more secure if Negroes were driven out of the auto plants. If there are any serious anti-Negro outbursts in the next year or two in Detroit, they will probably be the result of this growing job insecurity among all auto workers.

Nor do the employment policies of the large corporations particularly improve the status of Negro workers. Recently, to cite one example, the Chrysler corporation hired hundreds of new men, but almost none of them were Negroes. After Chrysler Local 7 of the UAW protested, a few Negroes were hired. Ford has hired a few more Negroes in the better jobs, but it is difficult to say whether this is the result of the traditional Ford policy of catering to the Negro population, union pressure (the Ford local has one of the best records on this question), or the "enlightened" labor policy of Henry Ford II. (UAW people, who find themselves at present in a very tough bargaining position with Ford, are inclined to regard this "enlightenment" as the invention of Ford's public-relations department.) In most of the auto plants there is little, if any, effort by the management to upgrade Negro workers to the better jobs. Squeezed between the indifference of management and the rumbling hostility of a portion of the white workers, Negroes are still a distinctly underprivileged group in the auto labor force.

On a formal level, the UAW has acted vigorously to defend the Negro workers. Its FEPC department has called regular conferences to push union work against Jim Crow; its educational film, *Brotherhood of Man*, an excellent piece of work, has been widely circulated; its numerous printed circulars have persuasively argued for equality. But the problem goes deeper.

SOME people cling to a stereotyped view that a militant and aggressive rank and file of union members is held back only by the leaders' timidity or bureaucratic indifference. Whatever the merit of this view on

other issues, it is certainly false with regard to the UAW and the Negroes. The truth is that in the UAW it is the top leadership that has the best understanding of the problem and the best record in dealing with it. Time after time, UAW leaders have risked the displeasure of their followers by advocating equal rights for Negroes. Endowed with a larger view of social trends than most members of the union, these leaders have sometimes butted their heads against the wall of prejudice. The records of the secondary officials, those who run the locals, vary widely. Some, such as the leaders of the Briggs local, have consistently fought for their Negro members. In others, leaders merely go through the motions of supporting the union policy.

The plain truth is that the bulk of the prejudice in the UAW is to be found in the rank and file, especially among workers of Southern or Polish extraction. There is a constant subterranean war in the minds and hearts of the white workers between prejudice and the education received in the union. Two incidents may illustrate this conflict. In November 1948 a Negro woman employed at the Hudson plant was disciplined for what other employees considered an unjust reason; first her department and then the entire plant shut down in protest. That would seem a heartening display of solidarity between white and Negro workers, would it not? But only a few days before this shut-down, the Hudson local had held a Hallowe'en party from which three Negro couples were barred by policemen called by an unnamed local official to "keep the niggers out." After much maneuvering and two membership meetings, the local instructed its committees to refrain from discrimination at future social affairs. But no one seriously believes that a mere resolution is going to solve this problem. Actually, quite a few UAW locals avoid dances because their officers fear to face the problem of "mixed dancing."

NEXT to promotion and seniority, social affairs remain the largest source of racial friction in the union. White workers who have acquiesced in union policy or learned to work

and go on strike with Negroes are still unwilling to go to the same dance with them. The Briggs local was compelled to cancel its first dance in 1937 when white members protested against the presence of Negroes; but the local's leadership has since taken a strong stand against discrimination and in recent years has held completely unsegregated affairs. In other locals, Negroes are seldom present at social affairs. In such matters, the vision and courage of local leaders would seem to be decisive.

A similar difficulty has arisen in sports activities. UAW locals have active baseball leagues in which white and Negro members play on the same teams. No problem arises there. But some of the very same men who play baseball with Negroes bitterly object to the union's attempt to organize a bowling league on a non-discriminatory basis. In 1948, after the UAW failed to force the American Bowling League to remove Jim Crow provisions from its constitution, it started a new bowling league. Few of Walter Reuther's acts have been more unpopular with large sections of the union's ranks. Why will a white worker play baseball with a Negro but refuse to bowl with him? One possible explanation is that white workers feel that there is greater impersonality in baseball than in bowling. When the baseball game is over, white and colored players usually dress and go their separate ways; but the bowling game is itself an intimate social event, in which members' wives participate, and which is followed by beer drinking.

Such contradictory behavior seems to be the result of strong feelings of prejudice being jostled by new equalitarian ideas picked up in the union. But the prejudice is at the center, and the new ideas at the periphery of many workers' minds. One conclusion that seems legitimate is that the minds of white workers remain compartmentalized: their frequent readiness to consort on equal terms with Negroes in the shops and on picket lines seldom extends to life outside the shop. In the May 1948 Chrysler strike, Negroes participated to an unprecedented extent in picketing, soup-kitchen work, and

similar strike activities, and the attitude of white workers towards the Negroes was warm and cordial. Yet when the local's FEPC committee shortly afterwards proposed a campaign against discrimination in restaurants near the plants, white workers were at best lukewarm, and many were openly hostile.

THE UAW's experience with the "Negro problem" provides a crucial test of how race prejudice can be combated and destroyed in practice. The experience is by no means conclusive or finished; the great test will come if employment seriously falls off. But a few conclusions are possible.

For the Negro workers, the UAW has provided a vital arena for expression and a means of achieving personal dignity. Negro participation in union affairs, though still inhibited and hampered, is on the increase; in some recent local union elections higher proportions of Negroes voted than did whites. In the UAW many Negro workers have learned to talk boldly and freely; they have learned that the whole white world is not a conspiracy against them but that there are unionists ready even to risk their careers to help them; they have begun, shyly and slowly, to live, work, eat, and play with white workers at the UAW summer camps. The spirit of the Negro workers today is as different from what it was fifteen years ago as the spirit of Ford workers is different from what it was during Harry Bennett's rule.

Here, then, is proof that the problem of prejudice can be attacked in daily life. It must be solved largely by empirical means: most white and Negro workers can overcome their fears and prejudices only by working and living together in the plants and, afterwards, by social contacts outside the plants. But in turn—and the paradox is only apparent—this empirical program can be instituted *only* by a leadership motivated by a compelling long-range program of social and economic democracy, an idealistic vision that would endow it with the perseverance and patience to work at the day-to-day tasks.

The role of white leadership is usually decisive. In the nature of things, most unions

begin with white leaders who have it in their power to win the confidence of Negro workers and thereby hasten the development of Negro leaders. This they can do by a firm policy of equal treatment, without condescension or favoritism. Few of the Reuther administration's acts have so helped it win the *eventual* confidence of the Negroes in the UAW as its refusal to be swept into supporting the demagogic proposal for a separate Negro post on the union's executive board.

The blend of long-range idealism and immediate tenacity of which we have spoken is particularly necessary for the UAW's ultimate task in the field of race relations—to try to spread its anti-prejudice education down through the ranks, where it is most needed. Rational appeals, formal statements, impressive resolutions have only a limited value. It is necessary to make over, so to speak, the thought and feeling of the average union member, the one who comes only to an occasional meeting and who is active only in times of crisis. This is not an easy job, and it may prove to be an impossible one if attempted by the union alone. But it is the fundamental job.

Of all the consequences of the unionization of Negro auto workers, there is one that may eventually surpass in importance all the others. As a result of the mass adherence of Negro workers to the UAW, important changes have taken place in the social structure of Detroit's Negro community. The Negro middle class as well as the Negro ministers and politicians have begun to show signs of independence. This makes for greater independence of the Negro community *vis à vis* the city as a whole. And within the Negro community, its middle class no longer commands the undisputed intellectual and political leadership over Negro workers it once did. The Reverend Horace White, Negro minister, has remarked that "the CIO has usurped moral leadership in the [Negro] community." It is on this rising and striking figure—the self-confident, experienced Negro UAW leader—that much of the future of both the union and the Negro community will depend.